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ABSTRACT

This document describes an interdisciplinary course in educational administration designed to develop teambuilding capabilities. The experiential, interdisciplinary approach of the course used the knowledge bases from both educational leadership and guidance and counseling. It is noted that the teambuilding course was designed as a combination of both didactic and experiential components, and that content areas include shared decision-making, historical perspectives, change theory, role of school personnel, basic facilitative skills, and group process theory. A one-day challenge course based on a type of experiential education called adventure learning is described as a cornerstone of the course. Participants, 15 practicing educators, are described and the course format is briefly reviewed. Course evaluations, which were highly positive, are discussed and examples of written comments from participants are included. The discussion and implications section of the document notes that it is important for students in educational administration to experience the collaborative process in a real way in training programs in order to be better able to understand the conditions of collaboration and facilitate the process as school-based leaders in school systems. (NB)

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# Teambuilding for Better Decision-Making

## An Interdisciplinary Course for Educational Leaders

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association,

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Teambuilding for Better Decision-Making

An Interdisciplinary Course for Educational Leaders

As school districts move toward collaborative improvement there is a recognition that most school personnel have had little training or experience working within schools on organized decision making teams. Collaborative teaming requires skills, abilities, and conditions. Transformational leadership involves the complex process of building these conditions whereby behavior is influenced less by direct leadership and more by a commitment to shared values. Graduate programs are challenged to produce prospective leaders who have not only technical expertise but also the ability to motivate others in the process of facilitating change. This workshop piloted an experiential, interdisciplinary approach to developing teambuilding capabilities which utilized the knowledge bases from both educational leadership and guidance and counseling.

The role of the school administrator is changing from that of a manager of people to that of a facilitator and coach. Training programs in educational administration recognize the need to develop the process skills that future administrators must utilize in working with people for making better decisions about teaching and learning within the school organization. Coach, team builder, and facilitator are descriptive of the emerging role administrators have in developing a collaborative culture within schools.

Counseling programs provide students with theory and practice in the development of basic facilitative skills and for understanding self in relation to others. Group process theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Tuckman, 1965) provides a framework for how task groups evolve through predictable stages. These skills and understandings become critical tools for facilitative leaders. Without such skills the implementation of collaborative cultures will be difficult.

The Course

The overall teambuilding course was designed as a combination of both didactic and experiential components. Content areas included shared decision-making, historical perspectives, change theory, role of school personnel, basic facilitative skills, and group process theory. Each content area was supported by an experiential activity selected to illustrate both content and to provide the opportunity to practice teambuilding skills. An example was the use of the activity *Winter Survival* (Johnson & Johnson, 1987) which illustrated the efficacy of consensus based decisions while allowing participants the emotional experience of achieving that consensus.

A cornerstone was a one day challenge course based on a type of experiential education called adventure learning. Pre-planned "adventures" provide the context for participant empowerment while teaching problemsolving. The educational experience involves successfully responding to personal and interpersonal challenges contained within the circumstances and tasks confronting students. The problem-solving tasks require a dependence on total group resources for successful accomplishment (Riggins, 1986). The "adventure" utilized group initiative games and a low and high ropes course to help participants build mutual support, strengthen communications and team spirit, and enhance creative problem-solving skills.

Participants

Participants were 15 practicing educators, 9 women and 8 men enrolled in masters degree programs in educational leadership or in guidance and counseling. The course met over a period of one week from Monday through Friday for a total of 37 contact hours for 2 hours of graduate credit. Day two of the course was the Challenge Day, taking place at an outdoor site at a neighboring university. Day five was Team Challenge Day in which students demonstrated learnings through teambuilding exercises, and developing proposed inservice programs for teambuilding in their local districts. Days two, three, and four focused on a combination of didactic instruction and group

process activities designed to illustrate the didactic material. Evaluative material on the course was derived from formal course evaluation, quality of students' teambuilding exercises and student journals. A followup survey is in progress.

Evaluation

Course evaluations were highly positive. On 17 evaluative statements ranging from "instructor displays a clear understanding of the course topic" to "I learned a lot in this course" percentages of students responding strongly agree were from 86% to 100% with most percentages in the 90s. Written comments included: "this course made more impact on my personal and professional life than any other course I have ever taken"; " I liked the experiential activities, especially the ropes course, the best class I have ever taken," " the team spirit involving both professors and students and the open communication." For improvement, the major theme was the need for more time. Students suggested that the course be offered during a full semester, that it would be more beneficial to cover a specific topic in more depth rather than to give so much information, and the need for a Teambuilding II.

From an instructional standpoint, any revision of the course outline will involve additional time for processing both content material and exercises. Additional time was needed for debriefing the challenge day. Riggins (1986) noted that students in these programs are changed and grow as a result of these experiences. We found that students needed sufficient time to share, for example, the initial terror at even the thought of the high ropes course and the feelings of accomplishment for themselves and the group when the last person was safely on the ground. Adventure learning strives for non-specific transfer of learning when the processes are generalized into attitudes and principles for future use by the learner (Gass, 1991). More planning is needed to help facilitate this transfer.

## Discussion and Implications

Our thinking about organizations and the nature of leadership is changing. Wheatley (1992) noted that in motivation theory, our attention is shifting from the enticement of external rewards to intrinsic motivators springing from the work itself and as we let go of machine models of work we must see ourselves in new ways. To tap these intrinsic motivators school leaders need both technical expertise and extensive facilitative skills. Programs in educational leadership have excelled in the development of leadership skills, and programs in counseling in developing facilitative skills and awareness of self in relation to others. As Senge (1990) points out it is imperative that systems create structures for working together in order to create conditions for improving learning. Collaboration has not been supported by school systems as a permanent structural condition.

School systems have made collaboration an informal process for making decisions and working together. The governance process and formal structure of the organization are weighted toward centralized authority and limited decision making. Collaboration has been made an expectation for people but not the school system. Thus it is important that students experience the collaborative process in a real way in training programs. A goal of this course was to create for students a collaborative experience in a powerful experiential and even emotional sense. With this experience as a base, they will be better able to understand the conditions and facilitate the process as school based leaders in school systems.

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